

Genocide; The Act as Idea. Berel Lang, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017: Pp. 224. CLO\$24.95 paper.

As some politicians draw equivalencies between culprits and victims by misusing memory and legitimacy, alongside concepts of aggressiveness, self-respect, and self-preservation; and scholars and human rights advocates aspire to reasonably identify, and define the controversial and evolving framework of “genocide”; this compact humanitarian practical analysis, appearing in the prestigious, comprehensive series Pennsylvania Studies in Human Rights, provides guidelines for morally-perplexed, legally-challenged, historically-minded, political-reform advocates and scholars confronting the crime of genocide while seeking justice for its victims.

A Professor of Philosophy (Emeritus), at SUNY-Albany, Berel Lang earned his Ph.D. at Columbia University, and served as a faculty member in multiple academic institutions. He conducted research at distinguished establishments, most notably the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Lang is a worthy successor to the pioneering public intellectual Raphael Lemkin who first coined the term “genocide” amid World War II’s horrors (26).

Approximating the concept of genocide—and the fight to eradicate such crimes—with its historical roots in the Holocaust during World War II, has increasingly become a tougher challenge because there have been many atrocities in the more than seventy years since the Holocaust ended. In addition, the Holocaust has become politicized, especially amidst the Arab-Israeli conflict. As an American of Jewish heritage, Lang wrestles with complex legal and moral issues such as the particularism of the Holocaust, the merit of group rights, international law standards, and the global dimensions involved in preventing genocide in specific circumstances.

This volume’s discursive and engaging style reflects its origins in lectures and invited papers (5). Lang builds upon his life-long ambitious work, meriting its detailed analysis. Having previously focused on narrower subjects, Lang tries to reconcile and blend universal philosophy with Jewish points of reference through examining the Holocaust’s evolving meaning, and its humanistic legacy, in genocide studies. He explores how a mostly Jewish calamity, in a contained area, led to articulations of broader understandings of “genocide” and “group rights.” Lang has previously highlighted how the Holocaust transformed into a permanent, omnipresent, global fulcrum to define the crime of genocide. He explored complex themes such as the relative importance of morality, intent, and actions, on individual and collective identities, in his first major work: *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

Expounding upon the appropriateness of contents, forms, even imagination, Lang broached problems of depicting unfathomable horrors in Holocaust Representation: Art within the Limits of History and Ethics (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). Specifically, he applied the philosophical theory of “witnessing,” to amplify issues such as personal choices, aesthetics, and cultural values to better

understand individual introspection and collective identities in *Philosophical Witnessing: The Holocaust as Presence* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2009). Because of the tension between highlighting the Holocaust's universal message and its resonance as a unique Jewish experience, it is significant that this elaboration on a global theme is published by the seemingly parochial/territorial, Tauber Institute Series for the Study of European Jewry.

Lang continued with a philosophical biography of a celebrated, prolific Holocaust survivor, in *Primo Levi: The Matter of a Life* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2013), a part of the series *Jewish Lives*, Lang, employing Levi's tragic individual lens of an engaging chronicler, depicts Levi as personifying a collective philosophical struggle with suffering's meaning in a dignified, humane manner amid horrors.

Non-state entities perpetrate genocide throughout Africa, and in the Middle East. In the volume under review, Lang analyzes contesting views pertaining to genocide, and their motivations, by exploring philosophy, including natural law, facets of evil (chapters 1 and 2), individual perceptions, collective identities, corporate conduct, domestic jurisprudence, and international law, among other themes. Presenting viable solutions, especially preventive models, poses even bigger challenges (75). Lang meets these tasks admirably. He updates and refines conceptual frameworks, assigns moral responsibilities, and offers practical protections to transcend political, ideological, religious, and ethnic divisions, such as the "social self" (194).

For ethical and historical reasons, Lang strongly prefers "genocide" to describe attempts to destroy a group (23, 102-105), over the oft-used, amorphous "crimes against humanity" (93). Such an emphasis is significant as non-state actors are increasingly more involved than traditional political entities in perpetrating illegal acts (23), thus challenging customary international law definitions. Lang is worried about mischaracterizing intent, as there may be cases wherein no state policy provides clear evidence of an "intent to destroy." Lang highlights in this context the disputed numbers of casualties in the Turkish "negationism" about the Armenian genocide (67).

Human rights specialists will appreciate the lucid delineation of the conceptual evolution from the Holocaust era of enshrining the crime of genocide in group rights through membership (chapter 7). Lang presents a different—better, more resilient, and inclusive—approach than conventional perspectives favoring individual rights as the primary philosophical and moral foundations of the postwar human rights structures and codes. He uses examples to highlight discussions that are drawn from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (145-146), and the existence of the International Criminal Court (148).

The last three chapters are insightful. Lang considers Lemkin as heroic; Primo Levi as a role model. Hanna Arendt, in contrast, is an antagonist. All three individuals, European Jews, personally wrestled with the Holocaust, especially its particular and/or universal meanings, from different ideological, national, and

philosophical vantage points. Chapter 8 focuses on Arendt's work and legacy. Using her evolving analysis of "Thoughtfulness" (150), Lang systematically—passionately, yet scholarly—dismantles her famous argument concerning human behavior, immorality, and justifications for punishment in: *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking, 1963). Lang particularly derides her lack of moral freedom, intellectual depth, and exclusion of her own past work, to avoid designating "radical evil" what is obviously demonic rather than banal (150-153). Accordingly, Lang decries Arendt's scarce appreciation for immoral imagination that compounded Nazi cruelty to Jewish victims, the absence of conceptualizing a "thoughtless" (157) brand of the "banality of good" as a corollary to the famous "banality of evil," her lack of grasping the wide implication of finding people like Eichmann guilty of crimes that could extend to numerous other culprits, alongside her understating of individual responsibility and conscious choice of evil doers (159-163).

In chapter 9, Lang methodically and systematically denounces the prevalent denials of the Holocaust, and other acts of genocide, particularly when atrocities are conducted for political reasons (169-172). He offers multiple and viable responses. His answers include dismissing the binary choice between denial and acknowledgement of genocide in favor of a more nuanced analysis, legislative solutions and factual findings to prevent, limit, and punish acts of genocide, while having regard for freedom of speech (185).

In a brief epilogue, "After Words," (191-194), Lang summarizes his three main "claims:" That "genocide" has become a normative standard, both legally and morally; that "genocide" can accommodate concerns about its scope and applications; and that "genocide" is preferable to any other designations. Lang highlights a realistic agenda for a strong international community, tied together by laws and morality, to prevent, intervene, and punish those who aim at perpetrating genocide. "Bibliographic Notes" concludes the manuscript (195-206).

Perfection is impossible in any scholarly work. Lang's erudite presentation may not strike a chord beyond the core constituency of human rights specialists. Not being a historian, while drawing upon law and politics, Lang is primarily grounded in philosophy, with an unavoidably limited interdisciplinary reach. Displaying understandable pride in his heritage, Lang does not refer often to millennia-long, humanistic and legal antecedents to perpetrating genocide, nor does he dedicate enough attention to patterns of discrimination and persecution in numerous countries affected by genocidal policies and practices. Instead, Lang favors Jewish foundations, knowledge, and perspectives (116-117). He practically conflates Holocaust with genocide, although others, especially the Turkish mass murders of Armenians during World War I, are mentioned (24-25). The Holocaust directly grew of traditional Anti-Judaism, amplified by modern Antisemitism, as old as Jewish interaction with gentile civilizations. Clearly, acts of bias and hate speech directed against Jews have grown even more potent—and violent—worldwide in general, and in America in particular, since this book went to press.

This is the book to read, contents to absorb, and recommendations to uphold, in these trying days.

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